

Syria: The story of the conflict

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More than 250,000 Syrians have lost their lives in four-and-a-half years of armed conflict, which began with anti-government protests before escalating into a full-scale civil war. More than 11 million others have been forced from their homes as forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad and those opposed to his rule battle each other - as well as jihadist militants from so-called Islamic State. This is the story of the civil war so far, in eight short chapters.

1. Uprising turns violent



Pro-democracy protests erupted in March 2011 in the southern city of Deraa after the arrest and torture of some teenagers who painted revolutionary slogans on a school wall. After security forces **opened fire on demonstrators**, killing several, more took to the streets.

The unrest triggered nationwide protests demanding President Assad's resignation. The government's use of force to crush the dissent merely hardened the protesters' resolve. By July 2011, **hundreds of thousands were taking to the streets across the country.**

Opposition supporters eventually began to take up arms, first to defend themselves and later to expel security forces from their local areas.

2. Descent into civil war



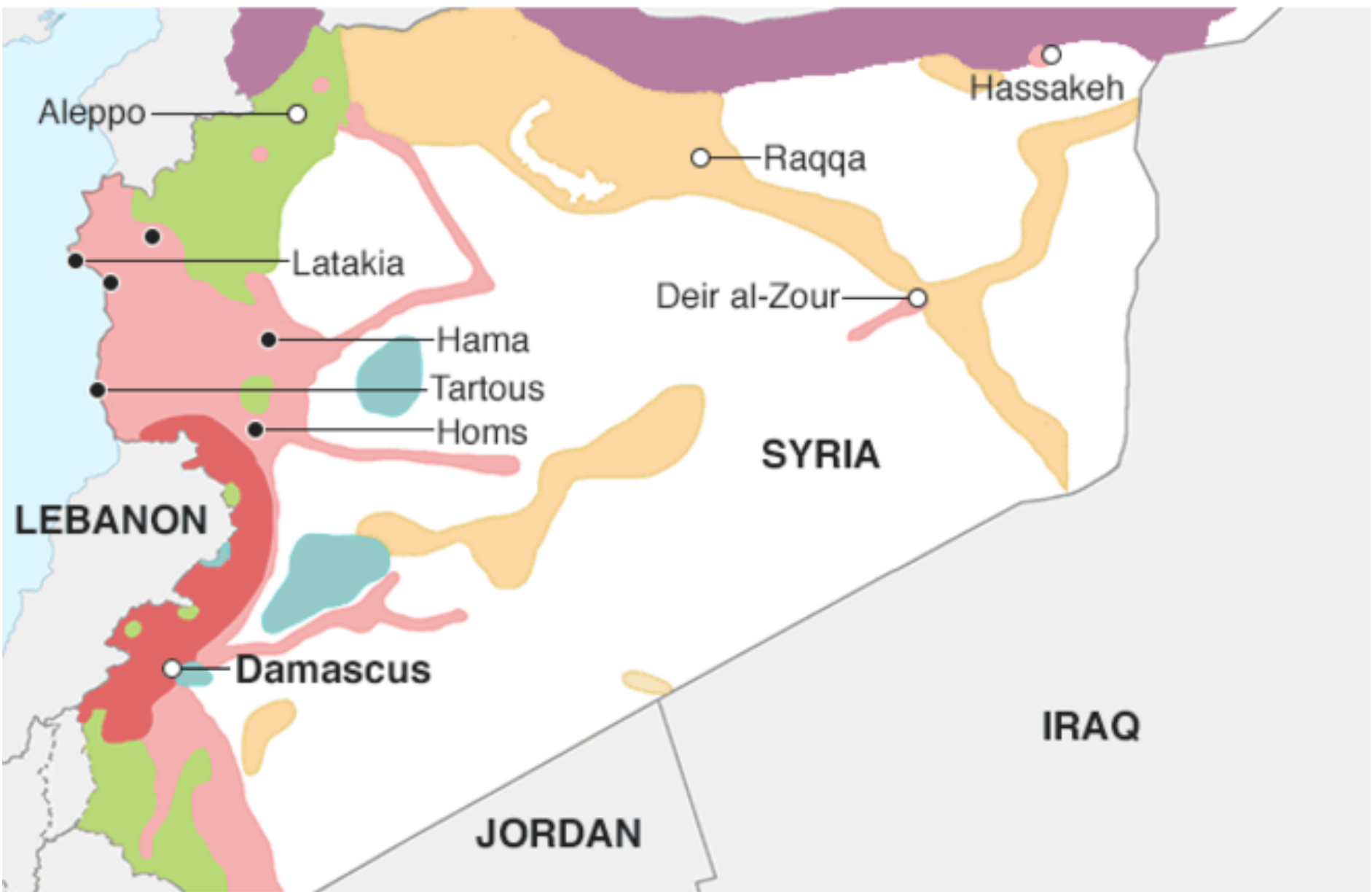
Getty Images

Violence escalated and the country descended into civil war as rebel brigades were formed to battle government forces for control of cities, towns and the countryside. Fighting reached the capital Damascus and second city of Aleppo in 2012.

By June 2013, the UN **said 90,000 people had been killed** in the conflict. By August 2015, that figure had **climbed to 250,000**, according to activists and the UN.

The conflict is now more than just a battle between those for or against Mr Assad. It has acquired sectarian overtones, pitching the country's Sunni majority against the president's Shia **Alawite** sect, and drawn in regional and world powers. The rise of the jihadist group Islamic State (IS) has added a further dimension.

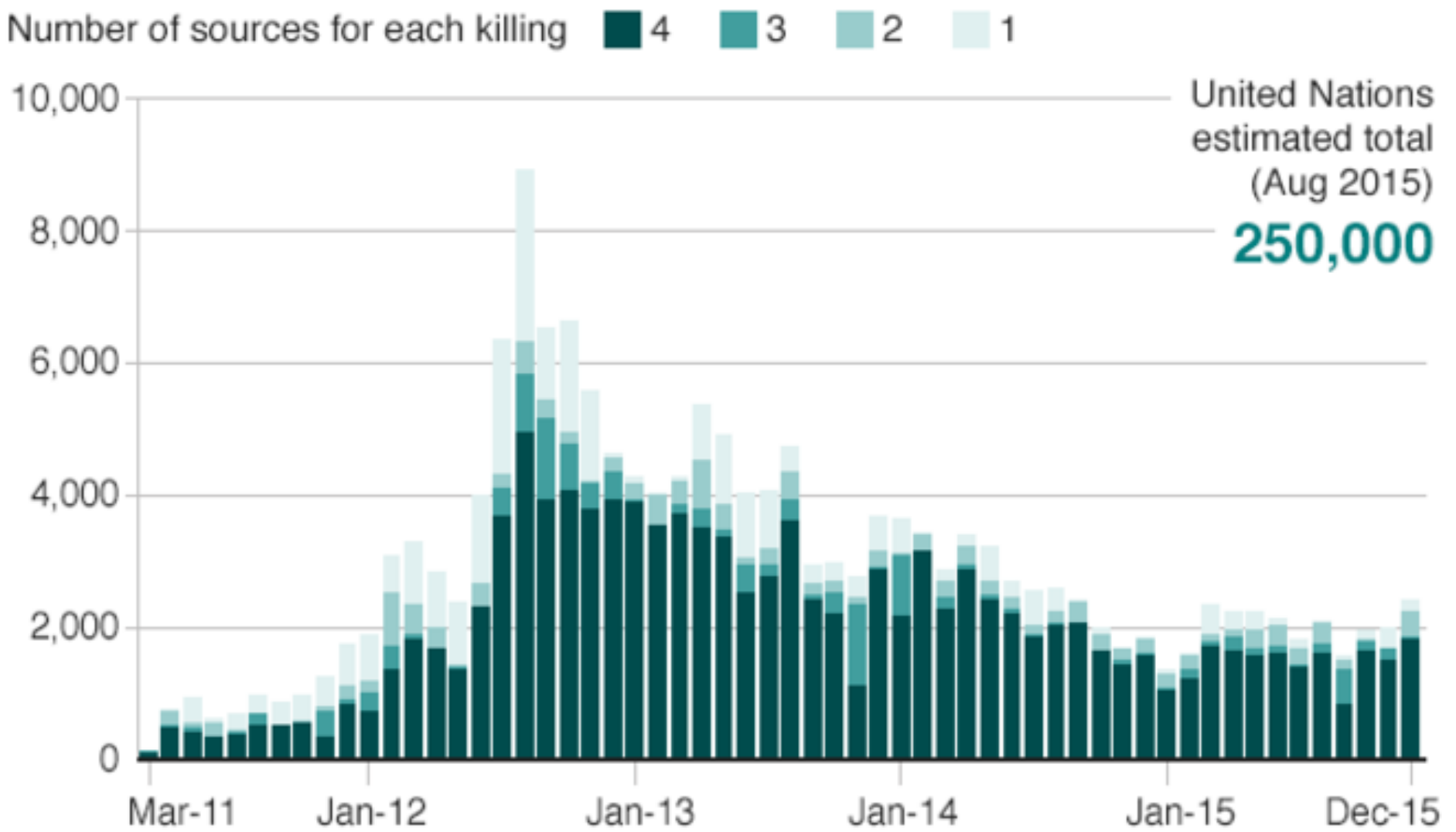
Regime control Hezbollah presence Kurdish Russian presence
Rebel control Islamic State (IS) control IS/ rebel contested



Source: ISW

Syria conflict death toll

Documented killings per month



Sources: Violations Documentation Center, Syrian Shuhada, Syrian Network for Human Rights, Syrian Center for Statistics and Research

3. War crimes



A UN commission of inquiry has evidence that all parties to the conflict have committed war crimes - including murder, torture, rape and enforced disappearances. They have also been accused of using civilian suffering - such as blocking access to food, water and health services through sieges - as a method of war.

The UN Security Council has demanded all parties end the indiscriminate use of weapons in populated areas, but civilians continue to die in their thousands. Many have been killed by barrel bombs dropped by government aircraft on gatherings in rebel-held areas - attacks which the UN says may constitute massacres.

IS has also been accused by the UN of waging a campaign of terror. It has inflicted severe punishments on those who transgress or refuse to accept its rules, including hundreds of public executions and amputations. Its fighters have also carried out mass killings of rival armed groups, members of the security forces and religious minorities, and beheaded hostages, including several Westerners.

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We're just living on the